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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 006612

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SUBJECT: KING READS RIOT ACT TO PARLIAMENT, GOVERNMENT, THE GOVERNING CLASS

Classified By: Charge David Hale, Reasons 1.4 (B) & (D)

¶11. (C) Summary. The King convened Jordan's political class on August 17 to an open meeting and read them the riot act. In particular, he demanded more responsible and constructive behavior by members of parliament, who continue to threaten to block the King's and government's reform agenda. This hastily arranged event, on the eve of the King's trip to Russia, reflects the King's growing frustration at the inability of parliament and cabinet to cooperate and perform.

It may be preparatory to dissolution of parliament this fall and early elections, now scheduled for 2007, based on a new, temporary electoral law. In our initial contacts, ministers and MPs said they accepted the criticism and felt chastened, but the underlying political problems stymieing the reform agenda remain unchanged. End summary.

¶12. (C) At short notice, on August 17, Jordan's King Abdullah convoked most of Jordan's political class, including cabinet ministers, leading members of parliament, senior advisors, and former prime ministers. The purpose was to give voice to his increasing levels of frustration with domestic political rancor. Attendees described to Charge a sobering and unexpected event charged with the King's controlled anger. Immediately after dropping this political bomb, the King boarded a plane for a postponed visit to Russia. The text of his remarks was released to the press.

¶13. (C) The King said he had asked the executive and legislative branches to work cooperatively as a team, but instead found them engaged in a "tug-of-war and arm-twisting." MPs may not be satisfied with the government's performance, he said, but they should know that Jordanians are dissatisfied with the deputies. He complained that whenever Jordan faced a problem, each party engaged in blaming others or standing aside, forcing the King to intervene, "as if responsibility is his own to shoulder." However, it was unacceptable for the King to have to resolve "every detail" or shoulder all responsibility alone. He criticized officials who blamed him anytime their action had negative results. The King was especially harsh toward former senior officials: "everyone of you should know that when you leave office, you are not being exempted from responsibility. On the contrary, you are a reserve soldier who should have a sense of responsibility toward the homeland that honored you with such a high position." To say that everything is good while you are in authority, and then claim all is wrong when you are out of office, he added, is unacceptable. (These comments were directed at several former prime ministers.) Noting that criticism is easy, the King said few had come forward with alternative solutions. Citing unemployment as a subject of political criticism, the King said in fact the problem was not a lack of jobs but a culture in which Jordanians refused to accept vocational or manual work, hoping instead "wasta" (favoritism) would win them a desk job. He also took a swipe at West Amman's salon rumor mill, which spread gossip and false news to the foreign press to serve personal agendas, as did Jordan's weekly scandal sheets. Denying once again that there was a hidden agenda to resettle Palestinians in Jordan, the King said the best defense against making Jordan an alternative homeland to the Palestinians) and he said there was no such plot) was teamwork in the effort to continue along the path of reform, modernization, and development, and passage of the legislation needed to do so.

¶14. (C) While the immediate provocation for the King's comments is unclear, his frustration level had increased markedly of late. He had sacrificed his close aide, Finance Minister Awadallah, and strengthened the conservative East Bank wing of the cabinet to satisfy parliamentary opinion, but found he had only whetted the deputies' appetite for noisy opposition. His two personal priorities for the brief summer session, passage of an anti-corruption bill and ratification of the Article 98 agreement, had met with ill-informed but effective opposition. He had heard the salon circuit talk that his handling of parliament had shown him to disadvantage. The two royal commissions working on the next phase of reform, regionalization and the national agenda, were at loggerheads. On the King's behalf, the Deputy Director of General Intelligence has been trying unsuccessfully to mediate between the heads of the two bodies, the authoritarian Senate President al-Rifai and the liberal Deputy Prime Minister al-Muasher. Key members of the national agenda commission were engaged in a public fight

over whether or not they could consider proposals requiring constitutional amendments) a debate which reignited popular fears that the entire exercise was a U.S.-driven effort to turn Jordan over to the Palestinians.

15. (C) Two of the recipients of the monarch's ire, perhaps not surprisingly, told Charge the next day the King was right. Ex-Speaker and current MP Saad Srour said he hoped the King's remarks would provoke MPs to debate national issues more constructively, and get them to focus less on their personal positions and the exchange of favors. He also hoped the existing parliament would pass a new electoral law that would produce a parliament more responsive to political programs, and less subject to personal agendas. But if it failed to do so, Srour recalled that every time Jordan had changed its electoral law, it was done on the basis of a "temporary law") i.e., a royal decree - and while parliament was dissolved; sitting MPs were simply unlikely to reform themselves out of office. Minister for Government Performance al-Ma'aytah told Charge the King's obvious fury was directed at the cabinet as much as at the parliament, and she acknowledged that the cabinet had drifted in August into inaction and internal bickering. Another MP, Abdul Karim al-Dughmi and a major opposition force in parliament to the King, was less contrite. However, he did expect that the King's tongue-lashing would produce a greater measure of cooperation when parliament returns.

16. (C) Comment: The King accurately described the summer political atmosphere in Jordan. Whether it was a constructive step to give public voice to his frustrations remains to be seen, but he has gotten everyone's attention and distanced himself in public from a discredited political class (the latest poll showed 8 percent popularity for the Badran government). If parliament does not rise to his challenge and pass legislation needed to advance Jordan's reforms, he has also set the stage for an early dissolution of the legislature (its natural term ends in 2007) and early elections based on a new and as yet unscripted electoral law. The King is well aware that such a step will be watched closely, at home and abroad, for evidence that it is a step forward, not backward, toward greater political participation and representation.

HALE